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Being Evangelized by the Poor

by Eva Villar
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12.VII.2002

Introduction

The title of my presentation has two traditional words rooted in the charism of the Vincentian Family — the poor and evangelization. Paradoxically, they are inseparable and distinct, yet a sign of a style that provides the Church a small grain of wealth.

From within this ecclesial milieu it is not surprising to hear Christians who live out their vocation serving the poor say that “the poor evangelize us.” We also feel the same way. It is with this title and this assertion that we begin our reflection.

The center of Vincentian Spirituality is the poor. This is best expressed by St. Vincent’s phrase in which he acknowledges that the poor are “our lords and masters.”

Evangelization is also a central point of Vincentian Spirituality — spiritual and corporal evangelization. St. Vincent did not miss any occasion to recall this point to the Charities (laity), through whom it all began; to the Congregation of the Mission, to whom he indicated that their service must also include corporal needs; and to the Daughters of Charity, with the request that they not forget “the soul” of the person they were serving.

Today, this idea is expressed in the words “holistic evangelization” for the Good News must reach and transform men and women in every dimension of their lives. It must liberate every man and woman.

Let us now move on to describing in greater depth the meaning of the phrase, which is the title of this talk: “Being evangelised by the poor,” which is an invitation that we cannot refuse given that we make our life in the service of the poor, and pass as witnesses who affirm: “The poor evangelise us.”

1. History of this assertion

The phrase “the poor evangelize us” did not come from St. Vincent but it well could have. All those, who, as laypersons, are concerned with evangelization and have met the poor, have adopted it. It is an experience common to all, to discover the virtues within our brothers and sisters in need that “judge” our choices and lifestyle. Anyone who has spent any time among the poor discovers that there are “seeds of the word” preciously hidden within them that end up evangelizing us.

The clearest Vincentian reference for this “common maxim” is found in the 1985 General Assembly document of the Daughters of Charity (*At the Crossroads*, p. 13): The poor often evangelize us by their patience and their ability to welcome.” But behind this assertion is a tradition that comes from St. Vincent and St. Louise that is expressed by the phrase “the poor are our lords and masters.” I will explain this in the following point.

2. The significance for St. Vincent

Our inheritance, Gentlemen and my brothers, is the poor, the poor: pauperibus evangelizare misit me. What happiness, Gentlemen, what happiness! To do that for which Our Lord came from heaven to earth, and by means of which we too shall go from earth to heaven, to continue the work of God who shunned cities and went to the country to seek out the poor. That is what our rules are concerned with, to help the poor, our lords and masters. O poor, but blessed rules of the Mission which bind us to serve them to the exclusion of cities! Mark, for this has hitherto been unheard of, blessed are those who observe them, because they shall conform their life and all their actions to those of the Son of God. O my God, what a motive have we here for the Company to observe its rules faithfully: to do what the Son of God came on earth to do! That there should be a Company, and that it should be the Company of the Mission, made up of poor folk, entirely devoted to that end, going here and there through hamlets and villages, leaving cities behind it, a thing that has never been done before, and going about to announce the gospel solely to the poor! And yet your rules consist in that (Coste, Conferences to the CMs, 17 May 1658, p. 416).

The expression is not from St. Vincent but he and his followers used it and put it into practice. The poor are our lords and masters for they are the suffering image of Jesus, our Lord and Master.

This is from a theological perspective but St. Vincent as well as St. Louise knew to look at the social aspect. Both knew, from their numerous contacts, just

how demanding, unjust, temperamental and ungrateful the “lords” could be. But at the same time they saw how those who served them did it with care and affection because when serving a master one listens. For Vincentians then, the poor become the masters that we serve, not for money but love.

In the same sense they are our masters because their needs and their situations tell us God’s Will. One learns from a master and Vincentians learn from the poor how to go to God and draw nearer to Jesus Christ. Their suffering calls out to us and invites us to live out a more radical poverty. They show us the sting of poverty. In the end, they evangelize us by their virtues.

After what I have just said it is easy to see that experience has created the expression “the poor evangelize us.” It is also easy, after meeting the poor, to remind ourselves that we are there with them because Jesus told us “go and evangelise,” because the Church, our association, our community has sent us and we find that it is Jesus himself who says to us through them: “go and teach.”

Fr. Robert Maloney, Superior General, made reference to this at the JMV General Assembly in Rome, on 11 August 2000: *We must encircle the poor with much delicacy and prudence; we cannot arrive with our bags full of knowledge (our goods). The poor evangelize us and send us back to our own poverty.*

3. Avoid spiritualizing the phrase and rendering it void of meaning

From the viewpoint of those who are excluded, spirituality takes on demands, not only of solidarity but also of being counter-cultural, opposing a consumer society, injustice, everything that causes exclusion. Living a spirituality from the context of the excluded, in my opinion, means being attentive to the cries of the voiceless and having Christ’s sentiments, being attentive to those whom Jesus identifies himself: “*Because I was hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, sick ... and you came to help me*” (Cf. Mt 25:31-46).

This moves us to take on a gospel viewpoint, one that is the opposite of the dominant culture of our time: that of power, money and superficiality... *You know how those who exercise authority among the Gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. Such is the case with the Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve* (Mt 20:25-27).

This attitude of serving the poor and the fact of being at the frontier is one of the most visible characteristic marks of the gospel message and of the spirituality of the 21st century.

We have said a great deal about the poor evangelizing us. I believe that this already stereotyped phrase brings us to a profound reality, which is that close to the poor and with them we better understand the commandment of love. And when personal needs come about and take up less time and energy because you are busy with those you love, life is completely changed. We better understand the gospel and it has a particular place in our lives that it did not have before.

Yet, there is more. Here, in the First World, when we talk about those who are excluded, we want to speak about those that we, from our consumer and opulent society, forget due to a complexity of economic and social problems. It is obvious that the pockets of poverty that we call the Fourth World are increasing. And now these areas are becoming more alarming with the massive arrival of migrants who have had to leave their country for these same reasons of exclusion, whether we call it globalization or whatever you like.

In this unstructured world that excludes people, the marginalized can barely exist because our selfishness has pushed them to that point. It always distresses me to see, in our Churches, that the place of the marginalized is at the door with outstretched hand.

We speak of seeing the face of God in the poor, but I believe that Vincentian spirituality today, in a world without faith and often without hope, requires of us that the poor see the face of God in us. It is only through love that we are able to witness to them so that they will recognize God's love from hearts filled by the Spirit. As St. John tells us, *"No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another God dwells in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us"* (1 Jn 4:12).

4. When we find ourselves among the poor, it is through life's experiences that we begin to understand

I have often experienced what I am going to speak about and it has changed my life and my spirituality. You cannot imagine how many lessons I have learned from other people! Without directly speaking of God, I have seen that the language of love is the clearest and most visible and that it guides us to the source of love, God.

After reflecting together, the MISEVI Coordinating Team brought to light some conditions that we consider essential in order to be evangelized by the poor and we would like to share them with you.

First, we felt that it was important not to consider the poor so much as “poor” but to look upon them as persons.

Within the context of ecclesial charity, within the context of the theories regarding charity and service and even within the context of the Vincentian Family we must “update” our vocabulary, going back to the meanings of words and giving each term a meaning, a sense, ridding them of all the connotations that have been given to them throughout history.

To speak of the poor within all of these areas largely implies a preconceived idea of this person who is poor.

We cannot make the poor the object of our evangelization, our help or our solidarity. The poor person is the subject, is an “I” with whom I am in relationship and from whom I must learn.

Linguistically the word poor means “having a need,” a person who does not have what is needed in order to live. The word poor is a qualitative adjective that limits an individual’s degree of purchasing power. It has become a noun by convenience or linguistic usage, but the poor are, first and above all, people (poor but always a person first). In reality, the word poor is a “disqualifying” adjective because it refers to what the subject has or has not. Normally the use of poor is a negative indicator as one who is poor is one who lacks something. Also, in our society, those in poor health are disqualified, the poor in intelligence, possessions, culture, God’s poor... The poor are all of these and they are disqualified, that is they are out of the big race. This big race that they are participating in is life and it seems that the winners are the flag bearers of a consumer society, of always having more, wanting instant gratification and the defenders of globalization.

The poor man or woman is first of all a person, a human being with rights and it would be well, from time to time, to reread and reflect on the Declaration of Human Rights, where one can also find the rights of women and children, to take them to heart and make them a part of our lives.

Having accepted Human Rights and the Word of God into our hearts, we acknowledge that every person is a child of God and has an inviolable right to be treated as such; that is, with the dignity and respect that all children of God merit, being created in God’s image and likeness.

With this we accept that the most important point is to justly value their dignity and from this comes equality (equal opportunity and equal rights) of relationships with others.

This type of relationship with the impoverished changes the attitude of the evangelizer or the servant of the poor for in this context the other has a place in his/her life and heart. It is a specific person with a face and a name, even a family name, surrounded by specific circumstances that makes him/her who he/she is, this way and in this situation.

This happens when the other, the brother or sister whom we are serving, enters into our life, our heart and we make his/her joys and sorrows our own. It is in this equal relationship that the sharing of my own life with another will occur.

The aspects that I am going to talk about now are aspects in which we feel evangelized. These are the personal experiences of the members of the MISEVI Coordinating Team.

The world's impoverished live day after day sensing the closeness of God's presence. God is near, familiar, someone who can be counted on, can be trusted in during good times as well as times of adversity and suffering. This ability to live in proximity to God evangelizes us.

These are people who, in the most difficult of situations, know how to understand the other, put themselves in the other's place and live the moment as brother or sister with the other person. This sense of family, this natural empathy evangelizes us.

They live simply and it is this simplicity that fills their relationships with the other person and with God. They face situations that arise with simplicity and from this simplicity comes creative love. This simplicity also evangelizes us.

We have lived in the mission *ad gentes* with people who are economically poor but rich in generosity, who give the little they have, even if they are sometimes in need. This generosity evangelizes us.

The joy of small gestures, their sense of the little things evangelizes us.

And of course their ability to relativize their own crosses, to live their own lives in the joy of being saved, all of this reminds us of our attitudes when facing our crosses and we are enlightened. And once again they evangelize us.

But for these aspects, as well as others, to become part of our lives and stir up our dormant values, we feel that we must take on inspiring principles so that our lifestyle will allow us to be open to the possibility of being evangelized:

The first principle that must be present in our lifestyle is **austerity**. It is difficult to program an austere life in the world in which we live. It is even more difficult not to become part of the consumer society. We must live with only the necessities in order to have the dignity of being men and women. Yes, we must use money, resources and technology. Austerity is an evangelical value. St. Matthew tells us: “Stop worrying over questions like, ‘what are we to eat, or what are we to drink, or what are we to wear?’ ... Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well” (Mt 6:31-33).

Austerity and trust in divine providence are two basic principles in order to evangelize and be evangelized by the poor.

Another principle is to live in an attitude of **sharing**, always being ready to share what I and others have, seeking a mutual relationship based on a “smile.” This predisposition takes in all the dimensions of my being, not only my activities or work times. This implies sharing my life, with its feelings and sentiments, in service and evangelization. We need men and women who desire to respond to the call of Jesus Christ: “Go and evangelise,” who firmly believe in the Good News and immediately want to institute the reign of God among all peoples.

In order to achieve this, it would be good to read the gospel with those who are impoverished, to pray with our brother or sister, to listen together and reflect on the Word of God and to share in the Vincentian way. Prayer helps us to form community. In the end it is trying to live in fraternal communion. Praying together unites and enriches us and creates family.

It is good to live in constant reflection, seeking out the causes of poverty, not only just noting them. We must formulate liberating activities for social change but not as a simple aid. We must act with a sense of reality. These are the other principles of our lifestyle that lead us to fully live the assertion that “the poor evangelize us.”

5. Vincentian Lay Missionaries sharing their experiences with us

Some of the laity in the mission *ad gentes* wanted to share some of their own experiences. I did not want to change any of their texts so I did a little cutting and pasting so as not to take up too much time.

From the JMV Missionary Community in San Pedro Sula (Honduras)

- There is something that fills our lives and renews us in our vocation and it is to see how the sick, those living with AIDS, hold on to life and fight up until

the last moment. It is unbelievable to share and participate in their activities and projects, seeing how they are supported and work together ... all the while knowing that death is very near and access to drugs and treatments is very limited. One is surprised by their hope, their trust in God and their own efforts to do a bit more (learning, working, doing things). This shared experience with them evangelizes us and causes us to question our own behavior in relation to life.

- The effort to do more, choosing to be concerned about the ecosystem, community meetings and work in rural areas with the local people, all of this facilitates considerable improvement in the quality of life of all the families. All of this is accomplished thanks to the conviction that nature is a gift from God, an inheritance destined for future generations and that the unity and organization of a community facilitates solidarity for the Kingdom of God. This experience has enlightened our community life and encourages us to continue, in spite of difficulties, to be seeds of hope.
- Knowing and being with children from broken homes, sharing with those who, from their earliest years, have travelled a very difficult road, the efforts of single mothers trying for a better life, their desire to offer their children a better future, the oldest brother, still very young, who replaces the father in the family, ... all of this invites us to appreciate the freedom and innocence of these little ones, images of God, and also of acknowledging the great effort and bravery they put forth to face life with courage and hope.
- The young who live in gangs and who are looked upon as dangerous and rejected by society, these young people who are given to drugs, sex and violence, with a past where one finds a lack of affection and basic needs, are often capable of displaying behaviors of solidarity, helping, caring, and sensitivity. They will enter into the Kingdom of God ahead of us. Because of this, we are convinced that all of us possess a wealth of goodness, even the “worst” are able to show this. And this presents us with a question: those of us who have received so much, in what measure will we use it?
- Faith sharing in an ecclesial community and the witness of laity who try to create and contribute in service for the Kingdom of God, all of this puts into question our manner of living our faith, formation and the missionary vocation that we must renew day after day.

From the JMV Missionary Community in Nacala (Mozambique)

We are four (4) in our community. We share the pastoral work and a part of our lives with the community of Vincentian priests on this mission. As you can imagine, it is a good team but there are never enough hands for all of the work.

I have a beautiful African dress, just my style (those who know me can well imagine). OK, I will be honest and tell you that I have another one but I want to tell you about the one I like the most. I have not worn it often. You could count the number of times I have worn it for I have only had it on twice: Christmas and last Sunday. Why? Because it is a dress for big feasts and holidays, not for everyday.

I am going to share with you what happened the last time I had it on. Last Sunday I was supposed to visit a community in the countryside, like most Sundays. This parish was having a marathon to combat AIDS and it was the last day, so I decided to wear the above-mentioned dress.

So, I felt wonderful up until the moment when we arrived at the Community of San Pedro de Mecurua. I will never forget this day.

When we arrived I began to look around and I began to feel ashamed. I met a woman with severe anemia, not because she was sick, but because of hunger. I felt terrible. I looked at myself and I looked at her and my conscience did the rest.

Then I continued to look around and I noticed that many of the people had become thinner since the last time I had seen them, and a month had not even gone by. The leaders of the area, Mr. Constantino and Mrs. Maria Magdalena, were nothing but skin and bones.

Now I began to understand why the young people of the area were not able to come to the meetings. It was famine time. The harvest had been poor this year and many people did not have enough to eat.

I know this period of famine happens every year and that, thanks be to God if there are no natural disasters, the harvest should be ready next month, but it is something I am not accustomed to yet. Then I thought about how many sacks of corn and manioc, how much food one could have bought with the money for the price of one of these dresses, which for Europe would be cheap, but here it is not.

I thought about it and I was ashamed. It has been a long time since I have felt so ashamed. If I could have disappeared I would have because to hear about famine is one thing, but to see it on the faces of people you know is another.

It is true that you cannot be carried along by sentiment. I know that. I was aware that I could not resolve the problem alone and I am not telling this to elicit sympathy. Those who know me know this. It is true that I am often moved by

emotion but this time I merely want to share what I felt and I do it in the hope that one day this will all change.

This is a beautiful mission, it is true, but there are also hard times where one asks many questions and helplessness reigns.

Yes, the mission is like this. It is not as easy as all that. But, well, the Spirit moves and we must never forget that alone we are nothing, and without God we can do nothing.

I hope this has been a good Vincentian sharing and I ask one thing of all of you, please, do not forget to pray for us.

From Nacala “Mpakha nihiku nikina” (“until next time” in Macau)

Silvia

(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER – DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)